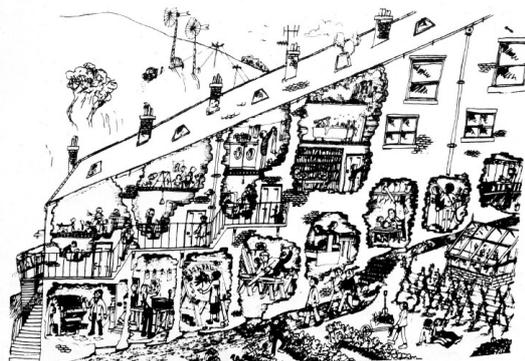
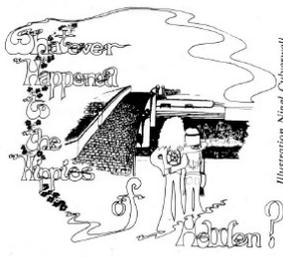


“Whatever happened to the Hippies of Hebden Bridge?” / Pennine Magazine / 1984

Whatever happened to the Hippies of Hebden Bridge.



The 1960s - the “Swinging Sixties” as they were called - saw the peak of the western world’s consumer age. People were better off than ever before, and lived like it.

A group of young people, influenced by bands such as the Beatles and the Stones, reacted against the establishment, material goods and parents. They hated gadgets that they thought symbolised their lazy world; mod cons like colour TV’s and washing machines. They became known as “Hippies”.

In Britain, by 1969 the movement had achieved cult status. Hippies moved out of cities (especially London) in droves, wishing to return to the simple lifestyle of an earlier age. Amongst the places they settled in were the Pennines- and Hebden Bridge in particular. It was chosen for its cheap housing, cheap standard of living, and its desolate surrounding countryside.

Among the people who settled here were my own Mum and Dad. They were separated, but lived together with my Dad’s wife, me, and several other friends and their children. I asked my Dad - Michael Piggott - why he had come to the area, bringing me with him!

“At that time,” he said, “I and several friends were trying to create a rural commune. We found this ideal farm on the hills above Hebden Bridge, after the centre of Manchester it seemed like paradise!”

We all lived at Latham Farm, a distinctively white farm above Old Town. It was almost on the moors, yet also close to the bus-route. Other groups of “Communes” moved into the nearby hills, as Hebden Bridge itself was fairly dirty and ugly. (We came in November 1970).

Dad and his friends were “very idealistic. We disappeared into the hills and waited for the Revolution!”

Has Hebden changed much, I asked him?

“Yes. It’s become much more middle class. When we came, the town was just a dirty mill town, in a state of decline. We came in the interval between two important periods - youngsters moving away, then creative and artistic people arriving.”

The population was very low. Then lots of professional people- doctors, teachers, social workers- moved in, making the place almost residential. It was nearly a dormitory town, but now a little industry is going on. But the town still has a high proportion of “Arty people”.

On the subject of tourism, Dad said “It hasn’t improved employment at all. But it has brightened up the town a bit”. Dad says the locals are a lot more tolerant than they used to be. “At first, when squatting was a big thing, the locals were very hostile. The local press were awful about the squatters, and the Yorkshire Post even had a bit of a ‘Witch-hunt’.”

“One day, a young man came up to the farm. We took him in, quite freely, and gave him food and shelter. The next day, we found out he was a young reporter from the Yorkshire Post. In

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no uncertain terms (but not physically) we asked him to leave. I wonder what became of him?” Dad won’t be staying in Hebden Bridge, for three reasons.

“First, I want warmth! For that, I’ll have to move abroad”.

“Second, I’m restless. I’ve been here for a long time, and it’s time to move on”. Here, Dad looked a bit sad, but continued, “Third, I’ve lost half my friends here. In 10 years, their ideals have gone right across the scale, from one extreme to the other. They’ve forgotten all the old hippy beliefs, and if you like have become ‘normal’ people”.

Dad says that if he has changed at all, it is that he is no longer idealistic. He is a bit cynical of the British working class, but “I still have my dreams. One day, they may come true”.

Several small shops were set up by the hippies, selling hand-made things such as candles and drawings. But only one has survived in its initial form - Aurora Health Food shop, on Market Street. I went to Aurora to glean some information from anyone who might be about. In no time at all I was speaking to Dave Ellwood.

“I used to live in Birmingham”, said Dave (in a slight Brummie accent). “I did various jobs, working in offices. I moved to Hebden Bridge in about 1972, because there was lots of work about (!) and the cost of living was low. A group of people who had just moved to Hebden had the idea about Aurora. I’ve been involved since almost the beginning, in 1972”.

I asked David how local people had responded to the idea of wholefoods. “It was slow at first, but business has got better with time. At first it was mainly pensioners coming in for their bran oats and herbs! But now it’s a much wider spectrum of the community”.

“Aurora is a registered co-operative, which means all the work is shared. It’s run under the Friendly Society’s rules, which means there is no owner as such, and all work and money are shared. There’s a lot of voluntary work as well”.

I asked David what he thought of the local people. “I think they are great once you get to know them”, he replied, “If you’re straight with them they’re straight with you. They take a bit of getting to know, and don’t accept you straight away, but they’ve always been great with me”.

David said that at one time, hippies were antagonized by the locals, this was when there was a lot of squatting going on. He felt that these hippies deserved a hostile reaction, as they used to run riot at night, “Hebden wasn’t used to hordes of noisy young people with long hair”.

These people were known as the “Teepee people” and were just passing through; they used to camp at Hardcastle Crag.

However, like Dad, David feels that the press were overtly nasty about the hippies. Did David object to the term ‘hippy’?

“No, I don’t think it’s derogative,” he said. “But it is perhaps a little outdated. At the time the movement began, it was used to describe a new movement, with different ideas and ideology, like the Punk movement later on. The term conjures up a certain image, yet it’s used to describe a very wide range of people. The word makes you think of long hair, beads, marijuana... but this is very outdated”.

David thinks that Hebden has got a lot prettier over the years. “It’s a lot tidier than it used to be”, he said, “but it’s sad that there is no work up here now. Tourism has got its good side and bad side, it provided some money and new jobs, but only to a minority of people”.

A magazine was produced for local hippies (or ‘Freaks’) - “Community Press” which was sold at Aurora. This was produced by local people, hippies and others, and covered such subjects as housing, asbestos, Calderdale Council and others. It was mainly about squatting and squatter’s rights.

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It has lots on the state of Hebden at that time, amazing facts like the one that “two out of every five houses in Hebden are lacking the basic amenities”, this in 1973.

Many hippies, unable to afford houses, or finding locals unwilling to let places, began to squat. One of the first was at Foster Clough, and many more settled at Queens Terrace. Here, hippies took over the whole row, some are still there to this day.

Soon Hebden had a reputation for being a hippie centre. One pub used often was the Albert, on Albert Street. Many hippies did not stay long in Hebden Bridge, they travelled all around the country, pausing only briefly in various places. But there was always a big population of hippies, if ever-changing, until about 1975.

In that year a book was produced. It was called “Alternative England and Wales” (1975, Philips Park Press), written by Nicholas Saunders. It was a catalogue of information for hippies, on everything from Plumbing to the Police.

It included a section on each part of England and Wales, and included an entry on Hebden Bridge. It said:

“Only a small old mill town built on the side of a hill so steep that rows of houses are linked by long flights of stairs cut into the rock. Surprisingly it’s the centre of a freak scene which is different to others I came across- most people only stay for a few months, if that, though there are more permanent settlers too. It’s also the only place in the Pennines where freaks are disliked locally. When I first visited the town a new bead shop was about to open - a few weeks later it had already folded, which didn’t surprise me. Queens Terrace is a strangely built triple row of back- to- backs mostly occupied by freaks- some paying rent and others squatting. The lower side had two houses completely wrecked last winter by the occupant burning all the timber to keep warm.”

This entry was not really flattering, and the mention of local hostility towards hippies was rather off-putting. By about 1979, hippies were either moving away from Hebden or changing, as Dad put it, into “normal” people. But then there was something of a revival, although unemployment was soaring from 3% (1979) to 16.4% (1982) more hippies seemed to move in. These hippies seemed to come and go, until today, those that are left seem to hide on the moors until Saturday night, when they all converge on the Trades Club in Holme Street to see some local band, who they usually are all friends with.

The major argument the locals have is that “on the one hand, they say they totally reject society, yet on the other many still cash their dole slips on a Monday morning”. Draw your own conclusions.

I spoke to one girl Joanna Williams (Jo to her friends) about what it was like to have moved to Hebden as an outsider. She is 17, and before moving to Hebden in August ‘83 lived in Derbyshire, before that she lived in places like Devon.

I asked her why she came here. “I followed my mum” she said, “I’d just left school, and had nowhere else to go. My mum came to help someone else move here!”

When asked what the word “hippie” meant to her, she replied “reminds me of several people my mum used to sort of ‘know’ a few years ago, sort of long hair, flared trousers. The ones I’ve met, that fit my description, have been all right”.

That just about wraps up my article about the Hebden Hippies. So they didn’t just disappear; most of them changed into normal people... but perhaps they still have their dreams. My Dad certainly has.

Ends